

Communication in Relationships, Part One

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If you plan to have healthy relationships, you must possess some effective relationship tools. One of the most important tools is communication, because the communication process is how we share who we are and what we want from a relationship. Communication is how we establish boundaries, and share our values, needs and concerns. Communication is how we solve problems, make decisions and resolve conflicts. Communication is the vehicle through which nurturing relationships are developed and the message of love is given. Ineffective communication can leave us frustrated, with our needs unmet.

Relational communication is about sharing information with another person. Communication is almost anything you do or don't do. At any given moment during an interaction, you are simultaneously sending, receiving and decoding messages. Anything that causes some form of change (spiritual, emotional, physical or mental) in another person is communication. Non-verbal cues such as facial expression, silence or touch, for example, can convey as much meaning as spoken words. Effective communication happens when your message is accurately received by the other party and has the effects you desired. It is impossible to "not" communicate; effective communication is another story.

Effective communication is intentional; if you really want to communicate, you will work hard to do so. You will genuinely care and make sure your partner fully understands what you are trying to say. Behaviors that damage healthy communication are often used as weapons to defend ourselves or to attack another. Ineffective communication tends to be self-centered and self-protective. Below are examples of unhealthy communication.

Stonewalling—people stop communicating either because they don't know what to say, are too afraid to say anything, or they use silence as a punishment. In any case, saying nothing abruptly stops communication. Communication is a "two-way street," not a monologue.

Grilling—the communication version of 20 questions. One person harasses and harangues the other into a "confession," or in other words, seeing it their way.

Mind-reading—occurs when one person assumes what the other is thinking or feeling without asking; then acts on that information as if it were true.

Blaming—is unhealthy for both parties, the "blamer" and the "blamee." The blamer merely feels weaker and more helpless because assigning power or responsibility to another through blame, undercuts one's own power and ability to respond. The blamee feels guilty or inadequate and simply quits communicating. Everyone loses.

Kitchen-sinking—is a scenario whereby a discussion of one issue ultimately opens the floodgates to a host of issues, most having little to do with the original topic. This is a great way to control or dominate a person or to shame them.

Accusations, criticisms, and negative innuendo—tend to disrupt the communication process in a dramatic way. These are the tools of a frightened, defensive or angry person. When we feel attacked, we want to defend ourselves. When we feel criticized, we become fearful, hostile or ashamed. When we are accused or criticized by innuendo, we feel helpless (or crazy).

The common theme of all these examples is a focus on self. These responses block the channels of communication. Effective communication is more than just words; it is the mechanism for growth and intimacy. Everyone communicates. The question is, "*What* are you communicating?" If you use any of the above, your communication is not only ineffective; it is destructive. Next time we'll look at some healthier ways to communicate.